OVERVIEW: *Rights & Freedoms*

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander movements**

Figure 1: The Aboriginal Tent Embassy, c. 1970s

**ACTIVITY: As you read through the overview text below and view the video clips on the Class Wiki (prompted throughout this reading), PARAPHRASE and RECORD notes CHRONOLOGICALLY into a table with two columns like the one below:**

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| DATE | EVENT & SIGNIFICANCE (Important information) | |
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**EXTENSION: Then, you can add these to your online timeline titled ‘The Modern World & Australia’ (Change the title of your past timeline and use it – merge the information)**

Since European settlement, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia have faced many challenges. At the start of the 20th century, Australia did not recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ rights to their traditional lands. Indigenous peoples were not considered equal members of society and did not have the right to vote in Queensland or Western Australia (though they were entitled to in the other states). They were also not allowed to enrol to vote in Commonwealth elections unless already registered in their own state at the time of Federation, denying many of them the vote at federal level.

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**Watch the video clip on the Class Wiki titled ‘Couldn’t it be fairer’**

Governments across Australia favoured assimilationist policies. Assimilation was the idea that Aboriginal people should be made to become as much like European Australians as possible, both culturally and physically. Indigenous culture, language and knowledge were regarded by assimilationists as inferior, and they argued that Aboriginal societies were doomed to die out. A solution proposed by assimilationists was to raise and educate Aboriginal children, where possible, within white households or white-run institutions, in the hope that they would eventually merge into European Australian society. In practice, assimilation meant the break-up of Aboriginal communities, the destruction of culture and the removal of children from their parents (which became known as the Stolen Generations). Naturally this caused great suffering for Aboriginal people.

Figure 2: Aboriginal children, described as half-caste, under European institutional care, c. 1920s.

**CONSIDER:** **1. What role does the does the woman in white, sitting on the cart, carry out?** **2. What evidence is there in this primary source to suggest that these ‘half-caste’ children were being moulded to follow ‘white ways’ and traditions?** **3. Have you ever been in a situation where something was decided for you because someone thought that they ‘knew better’?**

Aboriginal people were often told where to live, what kinds of work to do and even the people they were (and were not) allowed to marry.

In the 1920s and 1930s, new leaders emerged in the struggle for rights and equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 1937, Indigenous activist William Cooper presented a petition with 2000 signatures to the federal government demanding better political representation for Aborigines, asking that it be given to King George VI. The government refused. Then, in 1938, Cooper, together with JT Patten and William Ferguson, organised a protest to coincide with the 150-year anniversary of British colonisation. The ‘Day of Mourning’ was held in Sydney on 26 January 1938 at the Australia Hall. Cooper, Patten and Ferguson released a public declaration (a manifesto) for the protest, entitled Aborigines Claim Citizenship Rights.

By the 1960s, Indigenous life expectancy and health outcomes were still much worse than those enjoyed by other Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples still received inferior pay, were not considered citizens and were unable to vote. But attitudes were starting to shift.

In 1962, all Indigenous Australians were granted the right to vote in federal elections. This was followed up, in 1965, by the decision of the Arbitration Commission to award equal pay to Indigenous workers—a decision that led to some Aborigines losing their jobs as their employers claimed they could no longer afford to pay them.

****In the same year, a group of student activists led by Charles Perkins, inspired by the ‘freedom rides’ of the US civil rights movement, started freedom rides of their own (see Figure 3).Travel-ling in buses around New South Wales, the Australian Freedom Riders sought to highlight everyday practices of racial discrimination  against  Aborigines in rural Australia. They wanted toshow that, in some towns, Aboriginal people were refused entry to pubs, swimming pools and RSLclubs.The **Freedom Riders** encountered violence, were spat upon and encountered abuse.But they did su-cceed in showing wider Australia the extent of discrimination that still existed.

Figure 3: Charles Perkins and the Freedom Riders

**Watch the video clip on the Class Wiki titled ‘Blood Brothers – Freedom Rides’**

In 1967, the federal Liberal government led by Harold Holt called a **referendum** asking theAustralian people whether the Constitution should be amended to allow Aborigines to be includedin the Australian **census**. The referendum also sought authority for the government  to make lawsfor Aboriginal people. The referendum was overwhelmingly passed in all six states  with over 90 percent  of voters voting for the changes.

In spite of these successes, many challengesstill remained. The issues of land rights,political repr-esentation and the StolenGenerations were still unresolved. Aboriginaland Torres Strait Islander  people continued toendure inadequate access to health servicesand education.

The 1970s saw the creation of the Aboriginalflag, the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy opposite Parliament House, Canberra (see Figure 1), and the landmark *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* of 1976 awarded land title to the Gurindji tribe of the Northern Territory, as well as others. Themovement continued to grow during the 1980s,and in  1990 ATSIC (the Aboriginal and TorresStrait Islander Commission) was created.

Other significant events followed. The Councilfor Aboriginal Reconciliation was formed in1991 with the purpose of fostering harmonyand reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Victories were wonin the High Court of Australia by advocates of Indigenous land rights: The Mabo case of 1992 overturned the principle of ***terra nullius*** (the idea that Indigenous people had not ‘owned’ the land before European settlement), and the Wik decision of 1996 asserted that native title could exist alongside pastoral leases.

In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission released the ‘*Bringing Them Home’*report on the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families,stating that the removal of children had been widespread and continued to have a devastating impact onIndigenous people. In 2008 the new Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, formally apologised on behalf of the nation.

Figure 4: Kevin Rudd’s apology viewed by a crowd on Federation Square, Melbourne.

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**REFLECTION TIME!**

**How does your table look? You should have AT LEAST 10 ENTRIES in your chronological table! Check your work with a partner and discuss any areas of difference.**